

Monday, August 9, 2010

Good Morning.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to all of you today. I'm happy to join Rep. Walter Jones – there is nothing partisan about the good works of the Marine Corps League, 87 years old and going strong.

My heartfelt thank you for your commitment to the Wounded Marines Program, proving once again that you would never leave a Marine behind, and to your generosity with programs like Toys for Tots that bring Christmas to thousands of children who might otherwise be forgotten.

American men and women in uniform are in harm's way now in Iraq and Afghanistan, both wars about which the American people are divided. We must avoid the mistake of a generation ago, and I think we are. Whatever question Americans may have about the wisdom of a war, we will always honor the warrior- something you do without fail.

The mission our troops have in Iraq and Afghanistan is different from the mission our troops had in past wars. I remember having dinner with a soldier from Goldsboro on my first visit to Iraq in 2003. He said that what he was trained for, what our military was good at, was putting rounds on a target. We won past wars by defeating the enemy's army, and we defeated armies by putting rounds on a target.

We aren't fighting armies in Iraq or Afghanistan. Our mission in Iraq and Afghanistan is defeating an insurgency by shaping, clearing, holding and building the areas in conflict.

I recently returned from Afghanistan on a bipartisan Foreign Affairs Committee delegation to see first hand what our troops were up against there. We visited Kabul, where our delegation met with top military commanders, Ambassador Kurt Eichenberry, and President Hamid Karzai, in the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar, in the center of the fight.

Much work remains to be done, and American and NATO military leaders were candid about that, but I see real progress. Our military surge of thirty thousand additional troops has provided the security for a civilian surge of a thousand advisers who are working to strengthen local government, provide basic services and develop the economy.

The United States can't afford a Taliban government and it appears that U.S. forces are aggressively clearing tribal areas in Kandahar where the Taliban has always had sanctuary.

The standard of living in areas that have been secured in Afghanistan has gone up dramatically. Afghanistan has been in conflict for thirty years – conflict that destroys the economy and standard of living. Afghans are tired of the conflict and tired of living in extreme poverty. I think Afghans want to be secure from violence and the threat of violence; they want to grow and sell their crops so they can provide for their families; they want a normal life.

Our delegation also spent a day in Islamabad, Pakistan, where we met with government officials including President Zardari to discuss coalition efforts to rebuild Afghanistan and fight violent extremism in the tribal areas of Pakistan that border Afghanistan, and throughout the region.

The conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan are largely one conflict, and it is a conflict in which we have much at stake.

I also want to briefly discuss the work to do right by the Marines and their families exposed to toxic drinking water at Camp Lejeune.

But before I do, I know that the family of General Lejeune, your founder, would appreciate it if we would all pronounce the base named in the late General's honor Luh-jern, using the French-Creole pronunciation preferred by the Baton Rouge, Louisiana native.

But, I am from North Carolina, so bear with me. (pause)

Unfortunately, the top brass at the Navy has been slow to do the right thing for Lejeune families.

I am now working with the dean of the House, Congressman John Dingell, as well as Senators Hagan and Burr, on the Janey Ensminger Act.

It's estimated that more than a million Marines, Sailors, civilian employees and their families have been affected by the water contamination at Camp Lejeune in various ways – liver cancer, kidney cancer, breast cancer leukemia, birth defects, and on and on. The bill is named after one of them – Janey Ensminger, who died from childhood Leukemia in 1985 at the age of nine after being exposed to the water while her mother was pregnant with her.

I first heard Janey's story from her father, Jerry Ensminger, a retired Marine Master Sergeant, at a Science Subcommittee hearing I chaired. Jerry spent more than a decade learning about the connection between Lejeune's water and his daughter's illness. He swore an oath to her to find out what happened. He told us "I am still trying to live up to the motto 'Semper Fi'. Even after all I have gone through, and all that I have witnessed through this fight for justice, I, like most Marines still believe in those words. I will live up to our motto even though there are some present and past leaders who have failed to do so."

The Janey Ensminger Act requires the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide health care to veterans and their family members who have experienced adverse health effects as a result of exposure to contaminated well water at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. This bill will also create a presumed service connection for illnesses or disabilities that can be linked to exposure to the toxic chemicals found at Lejeune, just as Congress created a presumed connection between certain illnesses and exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam.

The childhood leukemia rate for children exposed to the water at Lejeune is twice what it is for other children, so there's a fifty percent chance that Janey Ensminger would have gotten childhood leukemia anyway. The Navy should not quibble with those innocent families, or shirk responsibility because the harm to Marines and their families the exposure to the water is difficult to prove with scientific precision.

The bill will make it easier for affected Marines to receive disability compensation for their illness. Contaminants found in the water – TCE, PCE, and benzene -- are linked to cancer, liver damage, birth defects, and leukemia, among other things. The contaminated wells were shut down 23 years ago; yet, we still do not have answers to basic questions about just what was in the water that those Marine families were drinking.

We owe at least this much to these Marines and we owe at least this much to their families. We must honor and support our men and women in uniform at home, as well as when they are in harm's way in foreign conflicts.

Thank you again for inviting me to speak to all of you. Thank you for your service, thank you for honoring and supporting those who are serving now, and thank you for your love of our country.